

THE OLD WAYS

RK SUMMERS



CHAPTER I

The beginning of a war

THE FOREST SLEPT, silent and still. Spring's first buds were opening to welcome the cool dew of morning, and a herd of white deer stood like sentinels, motionless among the pallid bodies of birch trees. The chill of winter had lessened, and the dusting of frost that sparkled in the pale morning light had melted away. A persistent mist still hung around the graceful trees like a blanket.

The brazen scream of a terrified child broke the silence.

A little girl gripped her mother's hand tightly as they fled through the bracken, her legs too short to keep up without aid. Her mother skidded to a halt, scanning the forest, muttering wildly to herself, "hurry, hurry!"

As if the wind had carried her plea to him, a slim, unkempt man burst through the foliage. A coat of blood painted his teeth red.

"Riaghán!" with a relieved sigh, the mother took a step to embrace him, but he stopped her.

"No time, Bram. I'll carry Thissy, hurry!" Riaghán spat blood onto the ground and swept his daughter into his arms. Jerking his head to indicate their path, he turned and ran, Bram racing after him.

Riaghán's thumping heart pounded in his ears. Thissy buried her face in her father's neck, her tears soaking his hair. The family dashed between trees, scattering the ghostly deer that blocked their path ahead. Thundering hooves fast approached, drowning out even Riaghán's frantic panting.

They'd been fools to think the forest would offer sanctuary.

"*Papa!*"

Thissy's scream punctured Riaghán's heart. He spun, clutching her tightly to his chest with one arm as a black-clad rider, mounted on a horse of easily fifteen hands, drew within striking distance. He raised an obsidian sword – Riaghán thrust forward his free arm.

"*Tarrthála!*"

Thick branches whipped down with a crack, curling around the rider and lifting him from his horse. The boughs squeezed. A moment later, the limp body dropped to the ground with a heavy thud.

"My thanks," Riaghán nodded to the oak tree. The family turned and ran again. Slower now, exhausted from carrying his daughter and his use of magic, Riaghán dared not stop for breath. He couldn't; not until they were safe.

"Cut them off!" a shout from behind drove terror deep into him. Despite Thissy's desperate sobs, Riaghán was too frantic in his movements to offer words of comfort. Bram tripped over a root and fell into the bracken. Riaghán veered to a halt. He hated the roughness, but blinded by necessity, he dragged her to her feet and pulled her onwards again.

An arrow whistled through shivering leaves, burying itself in Riaghán's shoulder blade. He screamed and dropped onto his knees, clutching Thissy tighter.

Thissy whimpered, breaking away from him as Bram knelt beside her husband. Riaghán trembled with pain as Bram laid her shaking hands on the wound.

"Keep still, my love," Bram whispered anxiously. In the distance, victorious shouts crept closer as more riders navigated through the foliage. This enclosed thicket bought only a little time. Riaghán silently blessed the confining forest.

"No, there's no time. Take Thissy and run. Hide. Bram, go, now..."

"But I can *heal*—"

"Go!"

Bram pulled Riaghán close and kissed him deeply, salty tears stinging between their lips. Thissy pushed herself between them and embraced him. Riaghán kissed her head, clutching his wife and daughter close.

“Papa?” Thissy began, but he shushed her.

“Go with Mama now,” he gasped, releasing his daughter and clutching his throbbing left arm. He looked up. “Bram... go to Elphame, to Queen Mab. Tell her he’s coming for her.”

A sob wracked through Bram as she nodded. She kissed Riaghán one more time, took her daughter by the hand, and fled into the sanctuary of the trees.

Riaghán knelt in the mulch of the forest floor, his breathing laboured. The cold iron arrowhead burned into his faery flesh. He desperately wanted it out, but knew he’d cause more damage by yanking it free.

Jeers of riders soon accompanied their snorting horses. Riaghán didn’t raise his head as they trotted to a halt around him. There was no need; he knew exactly who these horsemen were.

“Finally,” said the voice nearest him, carrying traces of a laugh. “I thought he’d never go down.”

Riaghán looked up, throwing a slow, cold glare at the finely dressed rider, but kept his tongue still. He prayed Bram and Thissy were long out of sight.

“A fine shot, brother,” said another, more sullen voice.

“Should we tell Father it was yours, Corvus? He’d be proud of you, if he thought you’d taken down a seelie—”

“Mothblood bastards,” Riaghán rasped. “We’ll never submit to unseelie rule...”

“Watch your tongue, leaf-ear!” The huntsman rounded his horse, kicking Riaghán hard in the face. He landed sideways in the springy moss, leaves clinging to his damp hair. His arm throbbed with mounting pain.

“Calm your temper, Malik,” Corvus chided. Malik frowned, then his eyes travelled past his brother at the sound of hooves. He

straightened respectfully as another horse approached, bearing a rider Riaghán had hoped not to encounter.

His fingers numb with fear, he pushed himself back to his knees. “Prince Erlik...” Riaghán swallowed. The prince wore a slithering black cloak, which put Riaghán in mind of shadows and smoke. The emblem of a great, black dragon proudly reared on the chest of his surcoat.

“Where is she?” Erlik asked. Riaghán stayed silent. Narrowing his eyes, he spat a bloody mess at the ground. The prince scowled, black-gloved hands tightening on his horse’s rein.

“Filthy seelie scullion,” Erlik dismounted, approaching Riaghán with a slow, dangerous pace. “Where’s your queen, leaf-ear?”

“You killed my son, you bastard.” Riaghán lowered his head. He murmured, “*Titim gan éirí ort... Mab, cosain mé—*” to his knees.

Rolling his eyes and tutting in disgust, Erlik sneered at the wounded seelie.

“You think a leaf-ear prayer will save you? You really think she’s listening?” Erlik unsheathed his sword. Behind the Prince, Riaghán saw Malik and Corvus glance at one another; these two brothers were just green boys, Riaghán realised. Two hound pups newly unleashed, desperate to prove themselves to their father.

“My sword is newly forged,” Erlik continued, pressing its point into Riaghán’s throat. “Yet to taste its first blood. You’ll have the honour. Unless you tell me where she is. Your queen for your life.”

Riaghán remained silent, counting the passing moments in his head. His eyes flickered up and down the blade: he couldn’t escape this fate. Gathering what little strength he had left, he staggered to his feet. Erlik took a step back, looking mildly surprised, but amused at this determination.

“To Annwyn with you! Long live Queen Mab!” Riaghán bellowed, thrusting his uninjured arm towards the nearest oak trees. Before he could utter the words to bring them to life, Erlik lunged forward, driving his sword deep into Riaghán’s chest.

The seelie gave a choked grunt. Blood sprayed between clenched teeth and over his lips. He fell.

Erlík withdrew his blade and glared at the dead seelie. Malik glanced at Corvus first, then looked at their father with an expression of hope. Erlík snorted.

“Did you expect me to be proud?” he asked his eldest coldly. “*You* let his woman and child escape, then encouraged your brother to lie to me. And Corvus?” The meeker of the brothers quailed. “Don’t show your miserable face until you manage to kill at least *one* leaf-ear by yourself. Do you understand?”

The brothers caught one another’s eye, faces reddening. Erlík mounted his horse again, pulling the reins. “You’re both a disgrace.”

He called to the other riders who had been waiting at the clearing’s fringe, “Continue the search. I want Mab taken alive and unharmed. And *unspoiled*,” he added, menace colouring his voice. “Send word to me as soon as you find the city. Torture every leaf-ear you come across; burn Albion to the ground if that’s what it takes. Just find her. *Find her*,” he repeated angrily, and pulled his horse away.

Hidden in the foliage, Bram and Thissy trembled at Prince Erlík’s wrath. Albion would suffer in a way it had never known. This war was only just beginning.

CHAPTER 2

In which a stag has a narrow escape

BEHIND A PATCH of undergrowth, hidden by his forest-green tunic, Thomas Rhymer pulled his bowstring taut.

Through the trees, a white stag peacefully grazed. The beast gleamed, so cleanly bright it almost glowed in the darkness, velvety antlers bent and twisted like the branches of an ancient tree. Ears twitched. It raised its head, turning towards him, staring with black, doleful eyes.

As he gazed back, Thomas felt his heart beat an uncomfortable staccato against his ribs.

What are you waiting for? Shoot!

But, instead, his hands shook. A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead. Something snapped. He let his arrow fly.

The unharmed creature bounded away, easily avoiding the arrow which, quivering, embedded in a tree trunk.

Thomas stared. He let out the long breath he hadn't realised he'd held, running his now free hand over his face. He couldn't tell; was it relief or fury he felt as the stag escaped?

Pushing his way out of the undergrowth while cursing his indecision, Thomas stormed to the tree to tug his arrow out. Sap bled and slid down the bark like honey.

He'd been hunting for years in these murky forests bordering Ercildoune. Just a *glimpse* of a white stag was a rare occurrence in Caledonia. *I'll never live this down.* He quietly decided he'd keep this sighting to himself.

A childish kick to the tree yielded only a sharp pain in his foot.

Thomas glowered at the tree as though it had done him some personal insult, then turned his back, starting his short trek home, limping on every other step.

Following roughly hewn paths through the trees, he approached a familiar warren of fat, healthy rabbits. As they had dozens of times before, his arrows caught up with them quick enough.

Well, he huffed to himself, tying the catch to his pack, rabbit for supper. Again.

Now pleased with himself at having made right his earlier failure, he ploughed on through the bracken until he saw thin wisps of chimney smoke. With a smile, Thomas left the trees' shade, heading up the grassy knoll towards home.

As he drew closer, he saw his younger sister Alissa darning a threadbare tunic in the warm autumn sun, lips pursed, no doubt humming to herself. At his approach she looked up, squinting against the sunlight at her broad-shouldered and square-jawed brother. Despite leaving boyhood behind some years ago, Thomas still bore the fair, wavy hair, pale blue eyes, and crooked smile of his younger days.

Something that made him the sweetheart of girls but the mockery of hempy men.

"Ahh," Alissa said, a cheeky grin spreading across her face. "Our brave knight returns!"

Thomas stopped dead, folding his arms with a sigh, a faint smile twitching the corner of his lips.

"But what's this, Sir Thomas?" Alissa continued, voice exaggerated. She lay down the tunic she had been repairing, and rose to circle him. "No great bounty claimed from your quest?" She nudged him, then playfully clasped a hand over her heart. "I fear our daring champion has failed in his crusade. For shame, Sir Thomas."

"You wound me, Alissa," Thomas gave her a quick smile and continued past, headed for the house. Alissa grinned and watched

him go, her hands planted on her hips. The breeze played with her unbraided hair and ruffled her skirt.

“Enough teasing,” came another voice from inside the house. “Any luck at all, Thomas?”

Their mother hurried, smiling, into the sunlight. She looked hopefully at Thomas’s pack and her shoulders lifted, seeing his modest catch.

“Rabbit again.” Despite her words, her voice harboured pride.

“I’ll go to town tomorrow—” Thomas began, and at once Alissa appeared at his side.

“May I go with him?” she asked, eyes gleaming. Thomas’s shoulders slumped when their mother agreed. Alissa returned to her darning, and Thomas huffed as he entered the house. Margaret followed, unaware – or perhaps ignoring – her children’s respective smile and pout.

“Thomas, don’t forget it’s almost Alissa’s name day.”

Thomas didn’t look at his mother. Instead, he untied the brace of rabbits and laid them out on the table. Margaret’s eyes counted them and at last Thomas glanced up.

“I know. That’s why I wanted to go into town without her,” he replied, trying his grin, but clearly failing to win her over.

“You said you’d already gotten her something,” Margaret looked mortified and absently played with the string of prayer beads around her neck, as she always did when she felt uncomfortable. Thomas snorted and shrugged.

“I may have coloured the truth a little, Mother. I know what I’m going to get her, it’s just a matter of... *obtaining* it.”

Margaret at last gave him a smile.

“You always leave everything to the last hour, just like your father.” Twisting the prayer beads, she reached with her free hand to touch a coney’s hind leg, then spoke again in a quiet voice. “Fifteen years ago today...”

Thomas’s smile slipped. He heaved a sigh and looked away again.

“He said he’d come back with a present for every name day he’d missed,” Mother went on. “That wretched war—”

“There never *was* a war,” Thomas cut in bitterly. “Father exaggerated. He just left us.”

“He loved us, Thomas, you know he did. He had his reasons for leaving, I’m sure, but...” for a moment her words hung in the air. “Well. At least he left us some decent coin. We’d be homeless otherwise.” She looked at her son, tensing uncomfortably. “You’ve been having those nightmares again,” she said in a quiet voice.

A disgruntled frown creased Thomas’s brow. “It’s nothing to concern yourself over,” he muttered, turning towards his bed space.

“We can hear you shouting in your sleep,” Margaret said, but he’d already stridden past her. “Thomas, don’t ignore me—”

He slammed the thin door behind him.

In the quiet of his own space, Thomas dropped the hunting gear by his door and threw himself down on his bed. He groaned into the down pillow, venting frustration. Emptying his mind of thought, he lay there for a while, and then dragged himself up to finish the rest of his chores while the sun still cast a useful glow above the horizon.

At day’s end, Thomas collapsed back into bed, falling asleep the moment his eyes closed.

It was a slumber in which he achieved no rest.

The night terrors were not new. Plagued by them since boyhood, Thomas had often awoken to the sound of his own screams. As he aged, he grew quite accustomed to his dreams, and although they no longer scared him, something about them still unnerved him; some strange, eager yearning.

In these dreams, Thomas saw places he’d never been, yet they seemed as familiar as his own home. Forgotten paths wound through forests he’d never traversed. Misty valleys lay stretched out before him, with cool morning skies blushing pink at the arrival of sunlight.

Yet, every night, as he walked through the woodland, these forests became engulfed in flame. Fire spewed from the maw of a huge black dragon as it stretched its spiked wings skyward. The beast tore through the trees, ripping them up by their roots. And in the valleys, with a roar of its fiery breath, it laid waste to all.

Over the sound of his screams and the crackling heat, Thomas heard others scream for mercy, begging forgiveness from the dragon for unknown crimes.

But this night Thomas dreamt of something new, something that roused greater fear and curiosity.

He stood much taller in this new dream, shoulders broader, blood hot with battle-lust, his arms strong enough to wield a massive sword with a ruby set into its pommel. His steed – a mighty black charger with hooves of finest obsidian glass – stamped and snorted, its eyes gleaming a flaming red.

“For the queen!” he heard himself bellow, *“And for Elphame!”*

He charged his steed forward, trampling hordes of soldiers that beset every side, trying to drag him down, realising the young captain would strike a devastating blow to their campaign. Thomas swung his sword in a downward arc, slicing a path of victory for his armies to follow behind.

Ready to announce triumph, Thomas turned his horse. Instead of seeing his cheering army, his eyes found a woman bearing two long, curving swords.

Fear muted all sound. His horse’s hot breath steamed in the air. The mount backed up, pawing the ground. Thomas’s first thought overpowered him.

Run. You will not survive this.

Her crimson armour gleamed under the wounded sky, the curved swords already dripping blood. Even her ruby-painted smirk masked the hatred behind her eyes, her beauty only a facade.

“Your father will never take our city!” he heard himself bellow.

She sneered, *“He already has. Your battle is lost!”*

Thomas woke with a scream, panting, soaked in sweat.



NEXT MORNING, THOMAS and Alissa made their way over the hill into Ercildoune: Thomas on Tatterfoal, his faithful gelding, and Alissa on her small grey pony. The warmth of the previous day had melted into a grey, misty morning, another sign of the approaching winter. Thomas wished he'd brought his warmer cloak.

The first bleary-eyed market dwellers were already milling between stalls when the pair arrived. Thomas felt as they looked: exhausted, cold. Far too miserable from his night of restless sleep to enjoy the prospect of wandering around a bleak, damp market.

Only the thought of catching a few stolen words with Úna – a particularly winsome serving maid at the Dancing Kelpie – cheered him.

“Thomas!” Alissa reached over and grabbed her brother’s arm. Lost in thoughts of Úna, Thomas started. “Look!”

Thomas squinted. There, where she pointed at the far side of the square, he saw several brightly painted caravans, and silently groaned. *Damn.*

“Can we go over? Please?” Alissa asked, affecting her most innocent smile. Thomas gave her a stony look in reply as he dismounted.

“Please tell me you jest,” he said, tying the reins of their mounts to the posts beside the smithy. “It’s not like—*Alissa!*”

She’d already jumped off her pony, heading through the market stalls, towards the caravans. Thomas’s groan escaped this time, and he followed her, instinctively touching a hand to his coin purse.

Dusky men stood beside the few already-unloaded wagons, full of stormy looks, occupying themselves with chewing on their smoking pipes.

Thomas instinctively inhaled, puffing up his chest with each step. One of the men blew out a mouthful of smoke. Trying to push through to reach Alissa, he walked headfirst into the cloud. His coughing fit and furious glare were met with sniggering.

“Fine, you’ve seen the caravans, let’s go now,” he muttered as he reached his sister, who had paused to look around. She tugged her arm out of his grip.

“Not yet, I want to see the fortune teller,” she said, standing on her tiptoes to see around the caravans. “I don’t see her, can you see?”

Thinking of his God-fearing mother, Thomas said, “A fortune teller? Alissa, Mother will kill you.”

Alissa gave him a cheeky smile. “Mother’s not here though, is she?”

Thomas cast a longing look back in the direction of their tethered horses, but knew he’d never leave his little sister alone here.

“There she is!” Alissa pointed, and, despite his better judgement, Thomas let her drag him along to a painted caravan, where a tiny old woman sat at a little round table, shuffling a set of well-worn cards.

Eyes alight with glee, Alissa stood before the old woman, watching her lay out her cards.

“Come on, Alissa,” Thomas said, coaxing her away. “She’s not to be bothered—”

“D’you want to hear yer fortune, lass?” the old woman suddenly asked, voice reedy with age. Thomas blinked when Alissa sat, nodding enthusiastically. Her eyes roved over the gypsy’s cards, but the old woman gestured for her hand. Alissa immediately extended it.

Thomas stood by with crossed arms, highly displeased at how this day was unfolding.

The old gypsy stared at Alissa’s hand, running her fingers over the palm. Thomas could see Alissa trying to stifle a giggle. *S’blood*, he cursed with a roll of his eyes.

The woman frowned, leaning in for a closer look.

“What’s wrong?” Alissa asked.

“Silver Wheel!” the old woman exclaimed. She looked up, taking stock of Thomas, her eyes agleam with whatever she’d seen. “Din’t realise you folk came this close.”

Frowning, Thomas and Alissa looked at each other. ‘*You folk?*’ Alissa mouthed.

“I’m sorry?” Alissa managed at last to say. Unsteadily, the crone released her hand and stood.

“Get yourselves back whence you came!” She waved her arm, angrily shoos Alissa away from her table.

A low growl escaped Thomas. “Beg pardon?” He stepped forward, one hand alighting on Alissa’s shoulder. Three heavily built men appeared from behind the wagon, and Thomas’s resolve wilted. “Come, Alissa,” he said sullenly. His sister nodded in miserable agreement as she dropped a silver coin onto the table in payment.

“Keep that poisoned coin, pixiekin!” the woman shouted, snatching it up to throw back. Alissa flinched when the coin hit its mark.

The men gathered around the crone, jeering. Thomas stood taller, holding his head high, but the men seemed to take his action as a threat. With flexing fists, they muttered black words and approached.

It took all Thomas had to shield Alissa from the clods of thrown mud as they ran from the caravans.

The pair skidded to a halt once they’d fled out of range. Both stood doubled over, panting.

Thomas wheezed. He sniffed and stood upright, trying to catch his breath. “Told you... we shouldn’t have... gone over...”

Alissa rewarded his smugness with a filthy glare.

SOMEWHERE AROUND MIDDAY, sun replaced drizzle and burnt away the cool mist. More people appeared in the market, taking advantage of the better weather. With Tatterfoal’s saddlebag

heavier now, Thomas and Alissa untied their horses, mounted, and headed back home.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to see Úna,” Alissa mumbled. Thomas said nothing in return.

They’d reached an unspoken promise, it seemed, to not mention the encounter with the crone to their mother. Alissa greeted her with a falsely cheerful grin when they arrived home. Thomas rolled his eyes, but Margaret said nothing about it. *Let her think we’ve argued.*

Once inside, he hid the skein of silk he’d discreetly bartered for, for Alissa’s name day, beneath his bed space. Thomas sat on his bed for longer than necessary, thinking about the gypsy crone.

‘Get yourselves back whence you came’, echoed as he got to his feet. *That old witch, the nerve of her!* Her words circled, unwanted, in his mind as he worked outside for the rest of the day.

Alissa must have noticed his bad mood, because it was only when he stopped to mop his brow that she bothered him to ask if he was hungry.

At day’s end, his back aching, his hands sore, Thomas kicked off his boots and rolled into bed.

Maybe tomorrow night, he mused as his last thought, *I’ll go for a drink at The Dancing Kelpie and see Úna.*

He rolled onto his back, thinking of the way her eyes lit up whenever he visited her. Eyes closing, he grinned at his last thought before sleep – stealing a few hours at the inn with such a bonny young woman.



THE FIRST DREAM sensation came from the deluge of rain, sharp and cold on his face. His dream-self stood on a cobbled street, coughing as pungent smoke cloyed his nostrils and stung his eyes.

Frantic civilians ran in all directions, screaming while half-armoured soldiers defended them as best they could from the legion of invaders.

Thomas's eyes were drawn to the city gates. Mounted on black horses, each accompanied by a score of black hounds, the invading army rode hard into the city, slaughtering screaming people as they tried to flee past them.

The defending army hurled lances and shot arrows, but any weapon that struck true met nothing but ashes.

Ahead of this horror, men and women fled the rampaging army, calling for sanctuary at a great white castle in their city's midst. Rain lashed the citadel. A slash of lightning across the velvet sky preceded a snarl of thunder.

"Nathair! We will not submit!"

Thomas spun around. A few steps from him, a radiant woman stood proud with her bejewelled hand forward, palm outward. A conjured shield of violet shadows protected her from the vicious attack of a single opponent.

Sneering, the dark-haired man opposite her fired bolts of magic from a black stave carved into a dragon's likeness. The woman never flinched, protected by her magical shield, her moonmilk face twisted into a furious countenance.

Her opponent laughed, his voice echoing eerily in Thomas's mind. *"Afraid of me, vixen?"*

Thomas blinked vigorously through the rain, shaking his head to keep his drenched hair out of his eyes. Eagerness to watch this battle overwhelmed him, even as his heart pounded in his throat.

"Enough of your games, Erlik!" The woman gestured with an easy, measured grace born of fury. A bolt of bright magic fired from her palm, striking the man, *Erlik*, in the chest, encasing him in a solid block of ice.

"Mab!" A cry for help on the ashy wind.

Both she and Thomas turned. The white city was ablaze. The castle overrun, dark riders swarming the streets, with more rushing over the black moors like a great wave. Thomas looked back at her. Firelight danced on Mab's face, her eyes wide and her lips thin. Her fingers curled into fists.

Her city was lost.

Thomas looked back at her. Her fathomless eyes fell from the burning castle onto him, glittering like moonlight on ice. *"Come home."*

Despite the raging din of battle around him, Thomas could hear her voice clear in his ear. So close, so real, he felt his mouth fall open.

Swallowing hard, he called, *"Who are you?"* But in the clamour of battle his voice was lost. *"Who are you!"*

Her attention had already left him.

She'd barely begun the journey back towards her crippled castle when, with a scream of rage and pain, Erlik's frozen prison shattered. Panting, he pitched forwards. A bolt of vivid red magic, thrust from his staff, struck Mab, wrapping around her like crimson snakes. The spell trapped her arms. She cried out and tumbled to her knees.

As though the last blow had sapped it of magic, Erlik's black staff gave a violent shudder and shattered. He stared at his empty hand for a moment, eyes wide and mouth open. Yet his face broke into a smirk when he saw Mab kneeling, struggling against her bonds.

To Thomas's horror, Erlik sped to his captive, silent as a phantom, pulling her to her feet, wrapping his lean arms about her. Wickedly grinning, he pressed his sharp-boned cheek against hers.

"It's all mine now," he sneered.

Thomas's growl sounded only to him. A bright flare forced him to shield his eyes. When he straightened again, instead of seeing that storm-sodden city, his eyes beheld Alissa and Mother's bed space.

Both slept peacefully despite Margaret's quiet snoring.

Wondering how he'd silently found his way in there, Thomas crept towards the thin cloth curtain that separated their bed from the kitchen.

And then he saw it: a shadow moving across the floor. Formless, no bigger than a mousing cat, the smoky beast ignored him.

With horrid fascination, Thomas watched the creature make its way towards Alissa, slithering up her blankets in deadly precision to the head of the bed. Thomas's feet had taken root; his throat closed.

The shadow, now bent over Alissa's face, paused. Thomas at once regained feeling in his legs. He lunged to swat the creature away, but his arm passed through shadow. Only a black cloud dislodged, evaporating gracefully into mist.

It leered as it leaned further forward. Rows of needle-teeth gleamed in the moonlight. It kissed Alissa's cheek, then pressed close to her skin. Black shadows seeped into her flesh. Alissa moaned in her sleep. Margaret twitched.

Thomas cast about quickly, his eyes seeking a weapon, *any* weapon. An iron poker lay by the banked remains of the fire. He seized it, thrusting it like a sword into the shadow, only inches from his sister's brow. It screeched above her, a hideous noise pitched between a cat's wail and a babe's scream.

It leapt off the bed, skittering up the wall to the window. Paused to turn, shrieking a warning. Shadows bled from the inflicted wound.

Thomas knelt by Alissa's bedside. The hefty clang of the poker hitting the floor did nothing. She hadn't woken; neither had Mother. Thomas looked up, but the window no longer framed the creature.

Lightning lit the forest outside. Thomas could swear he heard the baying of hounds and a wild, screeching whinny of horses. A rumble shook the house, and with the clap of thunder Thomas's eyes snapped wide open.